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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 AMMAN 002800

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SUBJECT: UNRWA TO LAUNCH NEW GOI DISENGAGEMENT RESPONSE PLAN

REF: AMMAN 710

Classified By: ADCM Christopher Henzel for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) SUMMARY AND COMMENT: Commissioner General Peter Hansen's departure from UNRWA has kick-started the UN agency's stalled effort to develop a disengagement response plan for the Palestinian refugee community, which comprises about 60 percent of the population of Gaza and 29 percent of the population of the West Bank. Senior UNRWA officials, who claim that Hansen discouraged scenario planning, are rushing to finalize a strategy that is likely to be centered on "de-congesting" the eight camps that UNRWA administers in Gaza. UNRWA officials claim the PA Planning Minister has agreed to chair a workshop to compare UNRWA's plan with the PA's Medium Term Development Plan (MTDP) within six weeks, and that Norway has invited it to brief the April Local Aid Coordination Committee (LACC). Given UNRWA's previous reluctance to coordinate with local aid organizations and limited experience with development, we may want to press the agency to vet its draft plan early on with other local agencies, including the World Bank. END SUMMARY AND COMMENT.

COMGEN HANSEN'S DEPARTURE KICK-STARTS UNRWA PLANNING

12. (C) With the departure of outgoing Commissioner General Peter Hansen, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is resuming disengagement scenario planning. (NOTE: The UNGA established UNRWA in 1949 to act as the primary provider of education, health, housing and unemployment/disability relief services for refugees fleeing violence in mandate Palestine. UNRWA currently has 1.6 million persons registered as refugees in Gaza and the West Bank, roughly 60 percent of the population of Gaza and 29 percent of the West Bank population. END NOTE.) At a March 17 meeting, UNRWA External Relations Director Andrew Whitley told refcoord that the senior management committee used its first post-Hansen meeting to shorten its planning timetable, "green lighting" the release of a comprehensive plan to respond to disengagement within six weeks (see para. 6 for likely components). Whitley explained that UNRWA's Acting ComGen Karen Abuzayd acknowledges that the PA is opposed to the UN publicly launching initiatives that might appear to settle refugees ahead of a final status solution (ref A), but believes that Hansen's previous go-slow approach was not just overly cautious, but shortsighted, given the social and economic implications of leaving Palestinian refugees out of larger efforts to develop Gaza and the northern West Bank.

13. (C) Privately, Whitley added that it was Hansen's farewell tour to the Gulf and Europe that convinced UNRWA Chief of Operations and Gaza Field Director Lionel Brisson -- a rival of Abuzayd who will continue to hold his dual positions through October -- that UNRWA needs a more comprehensive plan than the general approach it laid out in the 2005-2009 development plan (MTP) that UNRWA released in Geneva last month. Whitley explained that Brisson had hoped to use Hansen's farewell fundraising dinner in Riyadh to raise the full USD 10.3 million he required to open the second vocational training center in southern Gaza called for in the agency's MTP. However, when the dinner resulted in a USD 9.6 million shortfall, it was clear that UNRWA needs to look to its traditional donors (e.g., the EU, U.S. and Nordic States) who have been critical of the cursory way disengagement has been handled thus far in its MTP.

PA AGREES TO CONVENE WORKSHOP TO REVIEW DEVELOPMENT PLANS

14. (SBU) Whitley and Brisson briefed PA Planning Minister Ghassan Al-Khatib March 18 on UNRWA's decision to launch a parallel disengagement development program targeting refugees. Whitley claimed that Al-Khatib agreed at that meeting to chair a joint UNRWA-PA workshop, tentatively set for April 11, to discuss how the agency's yet-to-be-released plan relates to the MTDP. Deputy ComGen Karen Abuzayd told refcoord in a separate March 24 telcon, however, that she thought this meeting would slip to early May because the primary author of UNRWA's plan, Lionel Brisson, is scheduled to return to France for

gallstone surgery later this month. Whitley thought major donors would be invited as observers. He was unable to confirm whether the World Bank or other technical experts would participate.

UNRWA TO BRIEF LACC

15. (SBU) In the meantime, Whitley said the UNRWA senior management committee asked him to meet with Jerusalem- and Tel Aviv-based diplomats over the next month to raise the profile of refugees among donors and agencies involved in post-disengagement economic planning. According to Whitley, Norwegian Representative to the PA Sten Arne Rosnes is supporting his efforts by inviting senior UNRWA staff to present its plans at the April Local Aid Coordination Committee - a step UNRWA hopes will bring pressure to bear on UNSCO to invite UNRWA to participate in the next World Bank Consultative Group meeting. (NOTE: We are verifying whether UNSCO, a co-chair of the LACC, has endorsed the Norwegian invitation for an UNRWA briefing. UNRWA representatives do regularly attend LACC meetings. END NOTE.)

LIKELY ELEMENTS OF UNRWA'S PLAN

16. (SBU) In March 14-24 telcons, UNRWA officials indicated to refcoord that Lionel Brisson intends to draft the agency's disengagement response plan using in-house resources. At this stage, UNRWA appears to be hewing closely to the camp de-congestion approach it presented in response to donor queries last December (reftel). That approach consists of building new refugee housing on the margins of existing UNRWA camps and related infrastructure, including new UNRWA schools, health clinics and a second vocational training center in southern Gaza. UNRWA is also exploring the possibility of expanding its small business and micro-credit loan programs, which are currently the largest lending programs in the Gaza Strip.

17. (SBU) Staffing and land tenure could, however, be stumbling blocks. The bulk of UNRWA's initiatives would fall to the agency's new Camp Development Unit (CDU) -- an office UNRWA is attempting to establish under Technical Services Director Guy Siri. (NOTE: The creation of the CDU is a major institutional change, as it will take over responsibility for housing from the Relief and Social Services Program. END NOTE.) Last fall, the UN approved only one of the nine international CDU positions that UNRWA needs to stand up the unit. However, the agency believes it can make the CDU operational this year by securing external support from major donors. UNRWA is also in the early stages of negotiating issues related to refugee land tenure with the Palestinian Authority on 428,000 square meters of land the PA has offered UNRWA in Rafah to build refugee housing east of Rafah Camp. Eventually, it also hopes to open negotiations to obtain land in central Gaza to alleviate the severe overcrowding that exists in the four camps it operates between the Abu Kholi and Netzarim Junctions. The need for additional land notwithstanding, Brisson noted that UNRWA can start work in Khan Younis Camp in a 500-meter "buffer zone" of UNRWA-controlled land that exists at the western part of the camp between refugee housing and the Gush Katif Israeli settlement security zone.

18. (C) UNRWA is also under some pressure from donors to expand its emergency humanitarian assistance programs in response to disengagement. SDC Representative Fritz Froelich, for example, told refcoord March 24 that he is urging Lionel Brisson to consider doubling food rations to provide a more tangible "dividend" to refugees in the immediate aftermath of disengagement. He also believes that UNRWA needs to enhance its emergency operational support officer staff to ensure that basic humanitarian assistance is not disrupted in the immediate aftermath of disengagement.

19. (SBU) COMMENT: UNRWA will continue to be responsible for providing health, education, housing and unemployment-relief services for 1.6 million persons in Gaza and the West Bank following disengagement. However, its funding comes from voluntary donations, and it is struggling to provide basic services in all five of its fields (Gaza, West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan). With present resource constraints the agency will find it virtually impossible to initiate development activities for refugees in its Gaza and West Bank fields without securing additional support from the international community. Unfortunately, UNRWA's major donors remain wary of the agency's poor record of coordination with other assistance agencies, and its relatively limited experience with large-scale camp development (it has one ongoing project in Syria). Some donors (e.g., the EU, Switzerland) are also concerned that UNRWA will launch development initiatives

without explaining how they will relate to the agency's basic services or how UNRWA intends to phase out the emergency activities it initiated during the current Intifada. Encouraging UNRWA to work with the World Bank and other technical experts to develop a comprehensive approach that supports a stable withdrawal and addresses structural poverty through job creation -- while carefully phasing out its critical emergency food and short-term employment programs - would present a new face to donors. Offering direct technical assistance to UNRWA may also be critical to build donor confidence that UNRWA's initiatives complement other aid agencies' infrastructure and technical training programs.

HALE